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Verification Is SALT Key

The Heart of the Matter

First of four articles

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On the morning of last Dec. 23, presidential assistant Zbigniew Brzezinski placed a telephone call from Washington to the Soviet Mission in Geneva, Switzerland. When a Soviet functionary answered, the White House operator asked him to summon Secretary of State Cyrus R. Vance to the telephone.

Soviet Foreign Minister Andrei A. Gromyko and the inner circle of his SALT team, in the midst of negotiations with Vance, were taken aback by the unprecedented call to an American official through a Russian telephone. They believed the call to be highly significant and noted that Vance appeared uncomfortable when he returned to the negotiating table.

It is not known how much the Russians learned from the guarded trans-Atlantic telephone conversation, but their reading of Vance's reaction was close to the mark. The secretary of state had just lost a round to Washington contenders on a difficult and persistent strategic arms issue: Soviet encoding of missile testing information, or "telemetry encryption."

This skirmish at a crucial moment last December illustrates an important fact about the lengthy negotiations for a new strategic arms limitation treaty (SALT). There were two sets of SALT II negotiations in the Carter administration: a well-publicized set of bargaining sessions with the Soviets centered on nine meetings between Vance and Gromyko, and an equally important set of internal debates in 38 meetings of the White House Special Coordination Committee and four meetings of the full National Security Council.

The skirmish also illustrates the complexity of the bargain that has been struck between the superpowers. In this case, the issue was the second "common understanding" (in effect, the second footnote) to Article XV, one of 19 articles of what is probably the most clearly defined arms control agreement in history. The rich detail on every issue provided a fertile field for the expression of suspicions and cross-purposes between the nations, to be balanced against their common interest in survival in a thermonuclear age.

Verification—the ability to observe and thereby police what the other power is doing—goes to the heart of the differences in history, states

of mind and practices of the two nations. Secrecy has been a penchant of Russians long before the rise of communism, and it has been accentuated by a closed totalitarian system since 1917. The drive for certainty—"show me" proof—has been a strong American trait.

Technical means of verification—spy satellites, electronic tracking stations and the like—provide the underpinning of confidence that makes possible arms agreements between nations lacking in mutual trust. Thus the workings of these technological arrangements are of great political and military sensitivity.

When a ballistic missile is launched into space for testing purposes, it transmits telemetry—a stream of scientific data on its performance—back to ground stations. Intelligence agencies also are listening to check the characteristics of the other side's emerging weaponry.

After the 1972 SALT I agreement, the Soviets began occasionally to transmit missile testing data in code in an effort to deny the data to U.S. eavesdroppers. Although the SALT I agreement banned "deliberate concealment measures" that impede its verification, it was difficult to argue that the Soviet testing data were needed to verify the crude numerical limits of the 1972 agreement.

In the initial SALT II discussions, the Soviets proposed that they be permitted to continue "current testing practices" despite any potential impact on verification. The U.S. strongly resisted, contending that testing information would be of great importance in monitoring the more ambitious SALT II restrictions on missile capabilities.

In mid-1977 the Soviets conceded the issue of a special exemption for testing practices under the future treaty. This led to a debate in Washington over whether to press the matter further. Paul C. Warnke, then director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency, argued that the record for nonconcealment was strong and the matter should be left right there. However, Stansfield Turner, Central Intelligence Agency director, argued successfully that the United States should seek more explicit limits on telemetry encoding.

The problem was that the CIA and the National Security Agency insisted that U.S. negotiators not describe in detail the Soviet practices to be curbed, in fear of revealing far more than the Russians knew about the nature and effectiveness of U.S. surveillance. Washington policymakers

debated how to get to the heart of the question with the Soviets, while in Geneva SALT negotiators danced around the issue.

Finally, in Geneva on Sept. 15, 1977, "the Russians said the dirty word," as a U.S. official later described it. In response to a vague U.S. statement about "data measured on-board vehicles during flight tests," the Russians declared they felt free to use "various methods of transmitting telemetric information." A little later Soviet delegate Alexander N. Shchukin, a specialist in radio electronics, spoke openly to a U.S. delegate of "encryption." The taboo subject was in the open.

The United States began to push hard for a Soviet commitment against encoding, and the Soviets displayed increasing suspicion of U.S. motives. The Russians made clear they would not ban all encoding, arguing that all the telemetric information would not be needed for the verification of SALT II provisions. The United States would not provide a list of exactly what would be needed for SALT monitoring, in fear of revealing additional intelligence secrets and in hopes of obtaining as much uncoded data as possible.

After months of jockeying, the issue came to a head last December in Geneva. On Friday afternoon, Dec. 22, Soviet negotiator Viktor Karpov and U.S. negotiator Ralph Earle, working from instructions provided by Gromyko and Vance, hammered

out the language of a "common understanding" in which the Russians for the first time agreed explicitly to limit encoding.

The essence of the "common understanding" was that encoding of telemetric information would be banned whenever such an action would impede the verification of SALT. Encoding of performance data not covered by SALT agreements would be permitted. Disputes about details would be referred to the Standing Consultative Commission established by the two sides under SALT I.

With the Karpov-Earle language in hand late Dec. 22, Vance cabled it to Washington and recommended that it be accepted as the settlement of the encryption issue. President Carter had left town to spend the Christmas weekend in Plains, Ga., but Brzezinski convened what came to be known as "the midnight meeting" to consider Vance's recommendation.

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